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ABSTRACT

To reduce the possibility that children who do not fit stereotypical profiles of gifted children will be passed over, identifying students from diverse backgrounds for talent should be a multipronged effort. Outreach is especially important in areas when parents may be absorbed in meeting their family's immediate needs. To facilitate identification at school, teacher training programs now provide education about cultural and talent diversity among gifted students and about the ways learning style differences can mask evidence of special talents. The children themselves, and the adults in their lives, may not even be aware of their talents, but schools can use the following methods of identifying giftedness to make sure that students receive fair consideration: (1) standardized tests; (2) observation; (3) self-identification through biographical inventories; and (4) portfolios. Identifying the special talents of students from diverse backgrounds is just the first step toward helping them achieve their full potential. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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STRATEGIES FOR IDENTIFYING THE TALENTS OF DIVERSE STUDENTS

The number of programs for gifted students is increasing nationwide, largely the result of Federal grants from the Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Act of 1988. Students of color and those who are poor and limited in their English proficiency continue to be severely underrepresented in these programs, however. The reason is not that they are less talented than their middle-class white classmates; rather, their different experiences, values, and beliefs have prevented them from fully demonstrating their abilities through commonly used assessment instruments, and in traditional gifted education programs.

To assess the abilities of all students more accurately, educators are now using criteria for giftedness that give equal attention to academic and non-academic abilities. Identification strategies, consisting of both traditional and non-traditional methods, often include a review of student behaviors as well as standardized test scores (Frasier, 1992; Clasen, 1993). To better develop the talents of all students, teachers are being prepared to recognize diversity in giftedness. To ensure that children receive early enrichment in school if their family cannot provide it, many educators are also beginning the gifted identification process at the preschool level. Finally, to redress the past inequities in student selection for gifted programs, school districts are beginning to reach out to diverse communities to increase the access of all students to such programs.

Thus, the goal of education for the gifted has become inclusivity, not exclusivity (Frasier, 1992), although the debate over the value of gifted programs, particularly as they are thought to perpetuate student tracking practices, continues.

Defining Intelligence and Talent

Traditionally, a student's intelligence was considered in very narrow terms, defined by only those abilities measured by an IQ test. Now, educators are more likely to use the term "talent" instead of "intelligence," and to describe it as an indication of future achievement and a potential to be nurtured and developed, not a demonstrated, immutable ability. Emphasis is shifting from what a child knows to how a child learns (Hiatt, 1991; Clasen, 1993). There is a recognition that a great diversity exists among the gifted and their expression of talent, and, particularly, that different cultures express themselves differently. The result is that evidence of giftedness may be overlooked by evaluators unfamiliar with a child's native culture (Frasier, 1992).

Using Gardner's (1983) concept of multiple intelligences, many indicators of talent can be found in all children, regardless of ethnicity or poverty status. In fact, gifted people may manifest their abilities through just a single talent, such as music or mathematics. Also, evidence of giftedness, particularly in children of diverse cultures, is often non-traditional. Indicators of superior intelligence include the following (Griffin, 1992; Clasen, 1993; Coleman & Gallagher, 1995):

- The ability to manipulate a symbol system.
- The ability to think logically.
- The ability to use stored knowledge to solve problems.
- The ability to reason by analogy.
- The ability to extrapolate knowledge to different circumstances.
- Creativity and artistic ability.
- Resiliency: the ability to cope with school while living in poverty with dysfunctional families.
- The ability to take on adult roles at home, such as managing the household and supervising siblings, even at the expense of school attendance and achievement.
- A strong sense of self, pride, and worth.
- Leadership ability and an independent mind.
- Understanding of one's cultural heritage.

Assessing Giftedness

Identification Methods

To reduce the possibility that children who do not fit stereotypical profiles of gifted children will be passed over, identifying students from diverse backgrounds for talent needs to be a multi-pronged effort by many of the adults close to them. Involving adults from children's home, religious, and community lives in the identification process helps ensure that the availability of gifted programs is widely known. Outreach is especially important in areas where parents may be totally absorbed by meeting their family's basic and immediate needs, and unable to focus on the possibility that their children may be gifted or to provide educational enrichment.

To facilitate identification at school, teacher training programs are now providing an education about cultural and talent diversity among gifted students, particularly to help educators understand how learning style differences can mask evidence of special talents (Balzer & Siewert, 1990).

Neither poor academic achievement nor limited English language ability indicates a lack of giftedness (Shaklee & Hansford, 1992), for a variety of factors can prevent children from fully demonstrating their intellect. For example, a lack of access to stimulating educational materials and experiences can impede children's early intellectual development, nutritional deficiencies can compromise their ability to concentrate, social isolation can delay their development of inter-

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personal skills, and trauma from a disadvantaged and dysfunctional home life can depress their overall functioning (Balzer & Siewert, 1990).

The children themselves, and the adults in their lives, may not even be aware of their talents. At an early age, possibly as a result of discrimination faced by their family or an internalization of negative attitudes of educators, even very intelligent students may develop low self-esteem and an expectation of failure that compromise their efforts to succeed (Passow, cited in Anthony, 1991).

Also, children may not have the opportunity to explore their abilities in the early grades. Many schools do not provide a psychologically safe environment designed for experimentation and self-expression—one that would allow students to make up for time lost in a home environment that did not cultivate their talents (Shaklee, 1992). Thus, even by third grade, when it is traditional to assess students for gifted programs, some already will have adapted to an unchallenging education system, stifling their creativity and curiosity.

Assessment Tools

Schools can use the following methods of identifying giftedness in concert to ensure that all students receive fair consideration (Duncan & Dougherty, 1991; Shaklee, 1992; Shaklee & Hansford, 1992; Passow, 1993):

Standardized Tests. New standardized tests have been developed to replace traditional instruments determined to be culturally biased. They include Mercer's System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (SOMPA), Renzulli and Hartman's Scale for Rating Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students, the PADI diagnostic battery, and Bruch's Abbreviated Binet for the Disadvantaged (ABDA).

Observation. Recommendations from educators, parents, and classmates can draw attention to children's talents, such as sensitivity to and insight into their environment, and an ability to manipulate the symbol systems valued by a subculture. Soliciting such information can begin at the preschool level and continue throughout schooling. Parents can notice their children's level of absorption in intellectual tasks and unusually varied interests and curiosity. In fact, asking parents to consider their children's talents is a good way to encourage their involvement in enrichment activities.

Teacher observation permits the evaluation of development over time. Teachers can consider the way students problem solve, as well as their answers. They can see how students use their time, and how many of the talent indicators cited above apply to them. Also, simply asking students who is the smartest or most helpful among them can prompt teachers' identification of an otherwise unnoticed child.

Self-Identification. Through biographical inventories, students can indicate talents they use in non-school settings, such as membership in a drama club. They can describe their participation in family activities, and even indicate if they assume a management role at home.

Portfolios. Progress over time, along with overall achievement, can be assessed by reviewing the materials that students select for their portfolios. This allows for evaluation in areas such as exceptional learning, use, and generation of knowledge. Also, unlike standardized tests, portfolios permit assessment of students' creativity. To help standardize portfolio evaluation, schools can develop a list of criteria to consider, such as the complexity of the presentation.

Conclusion

Identifying the special talents of students from diverse backgrounds is just the first step toward helping them achieve their full potential. Educators need to develop programs for gifted students that reflect and respect their cultures and learning styles. Doing so will demonstrate to the students that they truly belong in such programs, and will help ensure their retention and success. Teachers, along with community members (including local colleges) and the students' families, need to work together to empower and encourage all students, and to provide them with enriching educational materials and experiences and role models and mentors.

—Wendy Schwartz

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